

Educational Reform in Finland

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EAD 845

August 18, 2006

The results of the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) in 2000 and 2003 have brought attention to the success of national school reform in the small Scandinavian country of Finland. Finland is not only one of the most literate nations in the world, it has the “narrowest gap between the high and low scorers” (Aho, Pitkänen, and Sahlberg, 2006, p.1) on the PISA exam indicating educational equity. That this goal was reached in a country that as late as the 1960's, was considered an agrarian society with limited education, makes it even more remarkable. How Finland accomplished educational reform producing significant achievement outcomes while many other countries have not is worthy of study and understanding. To some degree reform efforts in Finland are similar to those initiated in the United States in process and structure and yet the differences in the social, political, and cultural sectors between the countries may prove to have the greatest impact on the differences in outcomes. Whether or not it is possible to promote a new paradigm and focus in American educational reform to accommodate these differences is at this point a speculation but one with encouraging potential.

Finland began to restructure their system of education in 1968 adopting a top-down comprehensive school reform approach initiated at the national level (Aho, Pitkänen, and Sahlberg, 2006). Much of the impetus for this reform came from the recognition and culturally shared vision that “education has a direct impact on well-being as well as...economic competitiveness” (Aho, et. al, 2006, p. 11). A strong educational policy focused on equity and was supported and sustained by a homogeneous cultural and social energy that also contributed

to the development of the Finnish welfare state. All schools were assigned to a municipal education system similar to school districts in the United States in an effort to provide a more efficient delivery system of quality education.

At the same time, Finland departed from the strict tracking of students after the fourth grade, and instituted a nine year basic school for all students with the intention of providing high quality education regardless of age, domicile, economic status, gender or language. (Finland is a bilingual country speaking Finnish and Swedish.) The nine-year basic school is not only where children acquire basic knowledge and skills, but with the inclusion of school counselors in this age group, promotes an interest in life-long learning as well. Children can attend *any* school of their choice, public or private, free of charge although most stay in schools close to their homes and the number of private schools make them the exception. It is important to note that all private schools must adhere as well to the government mandates for curriculum and equity. As with all Finnish school reform, different phases of the plan were slowly integrated and implemented with every effort to include teachers and administrators in the process. The change in structure began with basic school then moved to upper school, vocational schools, higher education and pre-school as the reforms moved through the decades since the 1970's. Changes in structure enabled the entire system to allow for flexibility in meeting the needs of each student. The unified nine year basic school, free from tracking, was the beginning for ensuring high quality education as well as social equity and laid the foundation for changes in the curriculum and standards to follow. Much of this area of reform is similar to those reviewed in the Newman study (1996) in that Finnish school restructuring was comprised of "significant departures from conventional practice in...student experiences, professional life of teachers, leadership, management, and governance; and coordination of school resources" (p. 6). This

centralized control of change directives at the national level in Finland allowed for focused vision, sustained leadership and long-term planning.

Once the structure of the school system was determined the need for reforming content and curriculum was recognized. During the 1970's the first Basic School Curriculum Framework was mandated at the national level and has been continuously revised with the latest having been issued in 2004. These national core curriculum, developed by the National Board of Education, "includes general educational aims, objectives and contents of different subjects, as well as the principles of student assessment" (National board, 2001, p. 21). Each revision involves a long, deep, and thorough process working with all stakeholders— experts, interest groups, teachers and administrators. The revision process also takes into account changes in society and the economy as well as the understanding of the rising level of education in general, especially at the upper school level. Although the reform was initiated at the national level, local schools and municipalities have always been given the responsibility to develop their own curricula, choose textbooks, and select instructional methods thus empowering the entire school community from the local level up and from the national level back down. This collaborative system of curriculum reform was similar to Alvarado's strategy for New York District #2 as reported by Elmore (1997) "...there is no such thing as a wholly "centralized" or wholly "decentralized" strategy for systemic instructional improvement. Any systemic strategy has to involve discipline and focus at the center and a relatively high degree of discretion...in the schools" (p. 22-23).

Assessment, however, is the responsibility of the individual schools in Finland and is determined by teachers. Upper schools in Finland receive no numerical grades and there is only one national standardized test given upon completion of upper-school course work—The

National Matriculation Examination— much like the SAT or ACT, which entitles students to continue their studies at universities or polytechnics. This “non-graded school approach is to encourage students to become responsible, make their own decisions, and learn to plan their own life” (Aho, et. Al, 2005, p. 22). There are parallels in this system to the methods used at Cibola High School from the Newman study where “performance standards were adapted for individuals in the context of high standards for all students” (1996, p. 237). In Finland, student evaluation at the basic school level is guided by two constructs; continuous assessment, its role being one of guidance and encouragement based on individual learning and growth progress, and final assessment, which is nationally comparative and based on the objectives of basic education. All assessments are done by teachers and may be verbal or numerical or a combination of both. There is no national standardized testing for basic school students. Perhaps it is the combination of the structure provided by a national curriculum with the ability locally to adapt the evaluation, pedagogy, and specific curricula that leads to true achievement for all students.

The respect for and inclusion of teachers and administrators in the development and execution of the curriculum mandates may explain part of the high-level of teacher job satisfaction and committed professionalism that exists in Finland today (Simola, 2005). That feature of the reform process does not, however, explain the entire story. Historically, teaching in Finland has been a well-respected and highly coveted profession and Finnish teachers are well qualified. A master's degree is a requirement for a permanent teaching position in all grades. The profession attracts many of the best upper school graduates. Universities, in fact, accept only 10% of those applying for education degrees at Finnish Universities each year (Aho, et.al. 2006, p. 11). There is, as well, a continuous striving for professionalism. In recent years the focus of reform has been on the need for new types of life-long professional training for teachers to

include up-to-date research, virtual learning environments and changes in the working force. The emphasis on professional development mirrors the success of programs such as those in San Diego where teachers were part of an intense culture of continuing education and informed teacher input directly aimed at improving methods of instruction all with the goal of increased learning (Hess, 2006; Elmore, 1997).

The basic respect for education and teachers extends to students and Finnish classrooms are calm, orderly places for students to work (Simola, 2005). This social trust and respect for teachers in general enables true learning to occur without the distractions of disobedience and extraordinary efforts to discipline. Teacher satisfaction, status, and professionalism have contributed to the level at which teaching can be translated into learning. Success in educational reform necessitates a willing learner. Much of the literature detailing reform efforts pays little attention to the role of the student. The idea, however, that there must be a contract of understanding between teachers and students, a shared purpose and a recognized vision of teaching and learning that has attainable and sought-after goals in order for the process to succeed seems to be of equal importance.

Finnish have a dynamic view of the educational process. The concept of continuous improvement is an integral part of Finnish educational reform and since the 1980's there has been a push to increase the autonomy of municipalities and individual schools. In 1993 many of the powers that were once the province of the national central administration were redistributed. The shift from implementing national curricula to support for individual learning and locally based ingenuity and implementation based on fundamental social trust has demonstrated exemplary results. With the advent of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, the United States, however, seems headed in the opposite direction.

A summary of four guiding principles for educational reform in Finland, determined as much by Finnish society in general as the national government, are described in the book *Policy development and reform principles of basic and secondary education in Finland since 1968* by Aho, Pitkänen, and Sahlberg, (2006). They include:

1. “Good school for all, not for some, is the core value that drives education in Finland” (p.2).
2. Reform is evolutionary and not revolutionary.
3. Successful schools are enmeshed in the fabric of society—politically, culturally and economically. It is everyone's responsibility.
4. Respect for professionals in the field at the local level, teachers and administrators, their knowledge, understanding, and best practices, are used to build consensus and vision for the reform.

The success of school reform in Finland appears to rest with the combination of the above four principles and the viability of these principles has support from recent reports of reform efforts in the United States. From the focus on universal quality without exception provided by the first principle to the strong leadership engendered by a culture of respect and understanding for the task at hand, the Finnish experiment bespeaks a rare sincerity absent in the political considerations Americans sometimes face. Certainly Americans support free public schools focused on equity and quality and effectiveness of preparation for the future. But there are perhaps fundamental areas where America and Finland tend to diverge. The citizens of both countries apparently recognize the economic value of an education. Yet an American vision of long-term stability as a value and a goal associated with education—an evolutionary not revolutionary approach to educational reform appears to have been interrupted by the urgency surrounding the demands of No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 and its mandated thirst for large-

scale assessment. The Finnish approach, instead of focusing on the mechanics of measurement, seems centered on the successful efforts of teachers to provide direction and inspire hope in the lives of students and the irreplaceable impact that has on a social and personal level in Finnish society.

In an article in *The Economist* entitled “Back to school,” (2006), a headmistress in Finland when asked what made Finnish schools so successful replied, “Teachers, teachers, teachers!” Finland changed their education system “delegating responsibility to teachers and giving them lots of support” (“Back to school”, 2006). Certainly, professional development of teachers and administrators as a requirement for successful reform seems to resound in all the readings about reform efforts in EAD 845. To a great extent, it makes sense since teachers deliver the lessons and are directly responsible for methods and materials presented in each classroom. This is, however, only half of the equation. Finnish students bring the willingness and the desire to learn with them to the classroom. A desire born of societal values and respect for education, a trust in teachers that stems from the home and shared cultural beliefs.

The processes of reform in Finland are not that different from various reform initiatives in the United States (Newman, 1996; Berends, 2002; Hess, 2006) and yet there is a noticeable difference in the outcome. While Finland has achieved increased standing in worldwide assessments in the last three decades, the United States has seen a decline. American educators have tried restructuring, curriculum reform, enhanced professional development, and improved teacher qualification standards paralleling the Finnish reforms. The question remains, however, are there elements from Finland's educational *success* that can be imported to the United States? Where are the crucial differences found between the countries? There are many obvious differences not the least of which is size and homogeneity and yet the persistent and resounding

difference seems to lie in the attitudes and opinions of the citizens of Finland and their respect for teachers and the value of education. If that is a fundamental underlying difference how can it be changed?

Can educators develop a “rhetoric of attraction” in the United States that creates a culture of trust, respect and admiration toward education? A similar change in culture can be seen in public attitudes toward smoking. There has been a transformation in the last forty years in American views and social acceptance of smoking—a concerted public effort to reduce the basis for the solicitation of new smokers for what was once a “sophisticated” and widespread social routine. In this effort, which portrayed smoking with honesty and scientific facts, America demonstrated its national will and what can be achieved with a clear vision of both cause and effect and the energy of intent that is combined with unity and focus. If American attitudes can be transformed from the urgent need for change at any cost and begin to inspire the necessary level of trust and respect for education it deserves, effective reform can be achieved.

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